**NO CRYING HE MAKES?**
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**JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR**
**FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**Psalm 80:1**–7
**John 1:1–5, 10–18**

**"And the Word became flesh and lived among us."**
**John 1:14 (NRSV)**

So God was born as a baby in a stable in Bethlehem of Judea.
The divine light and love entered our troubled world,
where peace was kept among nations only by the Roman sword.
God wanted women and men to know the depths of the holy love in the heart of being,
the love that moves the sun and other stars.
The message was this:
Love is the ultimate reality and creator;
live in harmony with this love
and there will be peace on earth and goodwill among all people.

Morton Kelsey
*The Drama of Christmas*

*O God, the word you most wanted to speak to the world,*
*you spoke in Jesus Christ, your word made flesh.*
*Startle us again, in the midst of the familiar, loving customs of Christmas*
*with the freshness of your love made flesh.*
*Open our hearts and our minds to hear that good word again;*
*in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*

Good friend Barbara Wheeler, President of Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City, tells about flying from New York to Pasadena in December to make a speech at Fuller Seminary. Barbara spent three valuable upgrade coupons to secure a first-class seat so she could work on her speech during the flight. As take-off time neared, she was pleased that no one was sitting in the seat beside her—more room for her papers, briefcase, and laptop. But just as she was organizing her work, at the very last minute, before the doors closed, the seat was taken by a woman with a baby, "small enough to be carried in her lap, big enough to resist being restrained." We've all been there: your heart sinks and you prepare for the worst, which, in this case, is

exactly what happened. The baby batted Barbara's computer and grabbed her papers. When Barbara put her materials away in frustration, the baby kicked and screamed. Other passengers, trying to work, glared. Barbara gave the flight attendant an imploring look. The flight attendant banished the child and his mother, who was embarrassed and furious at everybody, to an empty seat in coach. "We all went happily back to work," Barbara says, "they no doubt on topics related to mammon, I to writing about God.

When she arrived at Pasadena and the meeting at Fuller Seminary began, President Richard Mouw, a Presbyterian and good friend of Barbara's, began with a devotional and a brief sermon. It was Christmastime and he read the familiar story in Luke 2, and he talked about everybody's favorite carol, "Away in a Manager," which is attributed to Martin Luther. "A great hymn," he said, "but one line is just wrong: 'Little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes."' "No," said Richard. "Not so. He cried. He cried for us. He died for us."

Barbara said she was cut to the quick, felt terrible all weekend, and knew that the Holy Spirit had arranged for her to be rebuked for her self-importance and intolerance.

That line is wrong: "No crying he makes." Of course he cried. He was a baby, a totally human baby. That's the point. In fact that is the incredible claim Christians make at Christmas, the soul-stirring, heart-warming, intellectually challenging notion of Incarnation, Emmanuel, God with us, God among us in the birth, the child, the man Jesus: God living among us in his life, God teaching us in his words, God showing us what it means to be human in his humanity, God speaking the final word about us and to us about our death. Incarnation. Of course he cried.

Down across the centuries the temptation in Christian theology has always been to focus on the divinity of Jesus Christ, his oneness with God, his holiness and sinlessness, sometimes at the expense of his humanity, his oneness with us. And the best resource for what Frederick Buechner calls "Two Voices" of Christianity, the divine and the human, is the Christmas story.

That, I conclude, is the reason why Christmas pageants are so very popular. Not only do they provide an opportunity for us to ooh and aah at our dear children and grandchildren and the children of us all, Christmas pageants make a very important theological point. They remind us that this is a very human story, a story like our own story, a story with which we can connect and relate on many levels. When our own children are reenacting the nativity, we and they are making a very important theological affirmation.

Both *Time* and *Newsweek* had cover stories last week about Jesus and Christmas and, happily, the theology of the Incarnation. It was a good week for us. Both articles were thorough, examining scholarly debates surrounding the Christmas story, and handled the precious Christian beliefs with respect. *Time* began its article with a description of the Christmas pageant at the First Presbyterian Church of Arlington Heights, Illinois, our neighbor. It was St. Francis who invented the Christmas pageant. In 1223, Francis of Assisi was disturbed by the way the birth of Jesus was expressed with jewels and gold and silk in the courts of the nobility. That wasn't the point at all,  all that extravagant luxury. For his midnight mass on Christmas Eve, 1223, St. Francis shocked everybody by staging the nativity complete with live animals, real people, poor people, and a real baby. The idea took, obviously. Every year thousands and thousand of churches do a Christmas pageant, and those pageants are wonderful. Some are sophisticated, with professional costumes and staging and full symphony orchestra and choruses. Most are not. Most are simple and eloquently human. I was talking with former Fourth Church members recently who met and married here, who were both active participants and leaders, and who, when their children came, chose voluntary exile in Lake Forest, where they are again active and supportive leaders in the First Presbyterian Church. Both of them were very successful professionals. When I asked how and what they were doing these days, Lynette said she was parenting full-time at the moment and that the high point of the season was her role in the church's Christmas pageant. She is the mother sheep, for the second year in a row. She has major responsibilities, she told me proudly. Her job is to crawl down the center aisle on her hands and knees in a sheep get-up, leading a flock of similarly attired little lambs. She says she always wants to carry a sign "I Used to Have a Real Job!" but obviously she loves it.

Dianne Shields, one of the Associate Pastors at Arlington Heights, another good friend and a bright, thoughtful minister, told the *Time* reporter that for the Christmas pageant, she puts aside her scholarly ministry and Velcros a pair of wings on her shoulders and becomes an angel who carries the Christ child to the manger. She had a chance for another role this year, but she chose to be an angel again. "I love holding the baby," she said. "I walk very slowly so that everyone can see and touch *her*." Jesus is a little girl this year—at least in Arlington Heights!

We need two voices: the holy and the human, the indescribably, transcendent mystery of God and the crying baby.

Fred Buechner says both voices speak in that other Christmas text, the wonderful prologue in the Fourth Gospel. Instead of a little story, John introduces Jesus Christ with these compelling words: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." That's the first voice—high, pure, like a choir boy singing and the sound of it rises to

the very top of the church. “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.” That’s the second voice, the human voice: “You need a human voice to get your bearings in the first voice’s unearthly music.”

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” That’s voice one. “John testified to him.” That’s voice two, the human voice.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” That’s voice one, and voice two is ours doing all those beautifully human activities we do at Christmas: decorating trees, giving gifts, singing our Glorias and Halleluiahs.

We need both voices. Our religion needs both voices. Our religion becomes something less than authentic when it neglects the human, when the humanity of Jesus, our own humanity, is not part of it. Interruptions help, Buechner says. At the highest point of the liturgy “as the priest raises the host, the janitor should walk through with a vacuum cleaner.” There should be interruptions in sermons, too—a baby crying, “to remind us of just what the flesh is the Word became” (*Air In Two Voice:, A Room Called Remember*, p. 82).

Theologian Douglas John Hall, in a recent book, observes that the greatest error in Christology (thinking about the nature of Christ) has been to dwell exclusively on Jesus’ divinity and not at all on his humanity.

That’s why *The DaVinci Code* was so compelling to so many people. The book asserts that the early Christian church covered up important facts about Jesus—human facts, including his marriage to Mary Magdalene—because the creeds of the church were focused on a divine Christ rather than a human Jesus. The book suggests that Jesus and Mary were not only married but had children and that their descendents are living secretly in the south of France. ABC News even did a special on “Jesus, Mary, and DaVinci” trying to track down the book’s claims.

It is, of course, fiction; the author is a novelist not a scholar. There is no evidence that Jesus was married, but what Dan Brown stumbled onto was the common assumption that Jesus Christ was divine but not exactly human. Was he married? Probably not. But if you can’t imagine him married, you’ve missed the point of the incarnation, the whole point of Christmas.

In a famous Christmas sermon, Martin Luther asked his little congregation in Wittenberg to meditate on the nativity, not in the abstract, but by looking at human babies. Luther said, “I would not have you contemplate the deity of Christ, but rather his flesh. Look upon the baby Jesus. Divinity may terrify man. Irrepressible majesty will crush him. That is why Christ took on our humanity.”

About that simple sermon the great philosophic theologian Paul Tillich said, “One of Luther’s most profound insights was that God made himself small for us in Christ. . . . God showed us his heart so that our hearts could be won” (*The Shaking of the Foundations*).

What difference does it make? All the difference in the world actually. If the Word became flesh, then flesh, our humanity, has been blessed and sanctified by God.

If divine Word became human flesh, the world—the material, beautiful, natural world—is not an evil place to be escaped as religion sometimes concludes, but a holy place, a good place, to be lived in and enjoyed, embraced.

If the Word became flesh, our own bodies are not to be escaped and denied but lived in and loved and affirmed and enjoyed.

If Word became flesh, humanity, our very humanness, now has about it the aura of holiness, and babies, all babies, become signs of God, God’s creativity, God’s love, God’s vulnerability.

If Word became flesh, then we who believe this and trust it and stake our lives upon it have worldly work to do. If God loves the world so much to come to it in a child and live in it, we can do no less than take the world seriously and live in it intentionally, and serve its people, and work to make all human life more humane, more secure, more just, starting with the children, all the children.

If Word became flesh and light shone in darkness and darkness has not overcome it, then even the darkness is different now.

My favorite page in my favorite book of theology, which I read cover to cover every Christmas, is *Children’s Letters to God*. My favorite letter is near the end. It’s by Nora. “Dear God, I don’t ever feel alone since I found out about you. Love, Nora.”

Word became flesh, our flesh, and so we are never alone, not ever. The young marine in the dark streets of Fahluga; the 90-year-old in skilled nursing, her family, brothers and sisters, all gone now, facing the end of her days; struggling parents, fresh out of resources and ideas; a young adult not knowing what her life is about and not knowing where to turn to find out; a middle-aged executive downsized and lonely on Monday morning at 8:00 a.m.; a newly retired teacher, doctor, lawyer, without the work and community that has been everything for the past 40 years; you, me, facing whatever we are facing. If Word became flesh, we are not alone, not ever.

Of course he cried.

Jesus Christ is the human voice of God. God with us, Emmanuel.

That is the very heart of our experience as Christian people, the faith that in Jesus Christ God understands you and me.

God knows what it means to be human, knows what it is like to love deeply and passionately, knows what it means to make yourself vulnerable because you love so strongly.

God knows what it feels like to be discouraged and disappointed.

In Jesus Christ God knows what it is like to long, to hunger, to dream and hope and aspire, and in Jesus Christ, God knows what it is like on the day that dreams are shattered.

In Jesus Christ, God knows what it is like to face your own mortality and the final mystery of death.

He cries for us.

He died for us.

In Jesus Christ, God came to save us, to show us how to live, how to be human.

“No one ever said it was going to be easy,” Frederick Buechner writes. “It is not an easy matter to save us when half the time we don’t even want to be saved because we are so at home in the darkness. We—none of us—come to the end of our days with the saving more than half done. But praise God, the end of our days is not the end of us” (*Air In Two Voices: A Room Called Remember*, p. 85).

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.”

Amen.